

Sam Berg Acceptance Speech – 1984, Newark Landmarks Award, Transcript

This is a recording of Dr. Sam Berg's acceptance speech following presentation of the 1984 recognition award of the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee. Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to be the recipient of the 1984 recognition award of the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee, which is presented for quote outstanding efforts toward the preservation of historic landmarks in the city of Newark, end quote. The word efforts in that phrase is as important as the word preservation, for although the efforts are unsuccessful in most instances, both for valid reasons and for dishonorable considerations, each case at least brings publicity, which calls attention to a forgotten or newly recalled historic landmark, and prompts some individuals to write informative letters to the local press, or to donate historic material to reference institutions.

In my youth I was affected by the demolition of what are now designated historic landmarks, and so my interest in local history must have begun at an early age. Since then, the extent of urban decay has progressed geometrically, especially in Newark. I perceived that historic preservation in Newark was a losing effort, that the best I could offer was to preserve the structural present for the future through photography. There is truth in a proverb that one picture is worth 1000 words.

What is my bond to Newark? I came to this city from New York in 1906 at the age of eight years. Have lived in the Roselle section for 78 years. I can recall certain structures which established me as a living observer of some of Newark's historic past. I remember Branford Place being cut through, and the cemetery of the original settlers between Halsey and Washington streets, which was obliterated in the process. I remember a structurally beautiful brownstone Fireman's Building on the northeast corner of Broad and Market Streets, with the monumental statue of the firemen on top. I remember when it was demolished and replaced by the present building in 1910 The father of one of my playmates was a carpenter in its construction, and it was through him that we were able to go to the roof by elevator during the construction. It was a tallest building in Newark at the time, and the near and far views from that height to us were fantastic.

I took trips to Coney Island and to Glen Island in Long Island Sound from a dock on the Passaic River at the foot of Market Street, just beyond the Pennsylvania Railroad. I remember taking the Plank Road trolley car from downtown Newark to Jersey City, then the ferry boat from there to Canal Street in Manhattan. Since the Hudson Troops were opened in 1910 those rides must have been between 1907 and 1910. The trolley route ran along the course of the first Trans Meadows Wagon Road, which was constructed with the trunks of cypress trees laid crosswise and heavy planks overlaid lengthwise. That is why it was called the Plank Road. I remember the old brownstone courthouse, which stood on the extensive sloping approach to the present courthouse, which [slowed?] with its long flight of steps and the Lincoln statue. I recall the tracks of the Delaware Lackawanna and Western Railroad being depressed from street level. The recollection is vivid, because when my aunt was leading me across the tracks on the surface to enter Branch Brook Park, one of my shoes somehow got caught, and I cried with fear that a train might hit me before I could extricate it. At the time, I looked down at the deep cut where laborers were digging away with pick and shovel. For years, I saw barges being pulled by mules on the Morris Canal. When World War One ended, so did commercial activity on the canal. My personal involvement with the Morris Canal was in late 1922 when I was on ambulance duty at Newark City Hospital, and made a run to the site of Centre Market to administer to a laborer who was crushed by an

overturned excavating machine, so I can date the end of the canal and the construction of the city subway without recourse to books.

You have been informed about some of the contributions I have made in preserving local history in one form or another, I have the satisfaction of knowing that the material I provide at the Newark Public Library has been utilized by a number of researchers, but I have been frustrated in endeavoring to preserve some of Newark's historic structures and objects.

Edward Weston was one of the pioneers in commercializing electricity, along with Edison and Westinghouse. He patented many of his inventions, the most famous being the light meter, used especially in photography. In fact, for many years, the light meter was a separate item before incorporation in cameras at that time when photo buffs gathered on photographic outings one would request another, please hand me your Weston, so that his name became a common noun. Weston's original laboratory was on the northwest corner of High and West Kinney streets. The first Beth Israel Hospital's hospital was built around this two-story structure, which then became the hospital laboratory. From 1926 to 1932 I was assistant pathologist in that laboratory, not learning until years later of its history. At any rate, when the new Beth Israel Medical Center was built on Lyons Avenue, and the old structure demolished, I tried to have the laboratory building preserved, since the apartment complex to be erected there was to avoid the land on which it stood. There was not even a response to that proposal. The Weston Electrical Instrument Company occupies an extensive area on Frelinghuysen Avenue, opposite Weequahic Park, and is in itself a commercial landmark. .

I discovered an exposed brick water cistern in a large vacant area on Broad Street, a block or so past the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad Bridge. Similar cisterns were constructed at various locations within the city and were the sources of water for volunteer firemen manning their fire hose and water pump vehicles hand drawn and hand pumped. I tried to get the Newark Fire Department interested in preserving and transferring it to another site, but the response was what one would expect from a municipal employee. When the original tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad were first laid on a surface [unintelligible], a portion ran from Market Street north alongside what is now McCarter Highway. I tried to get a short length of these tracks designated for historic preservation again without success. The tracks are still in their original position.

The history of Grace Church on Broad and Walnut Streets, as related in a book by the same title, states that part of the church stands on foundations of the old courthouse, and in these foundations is stone removed from the old Newark meeting house, the second home of the First Presbyterian Church, which was erected in 1708. Still, there are the dungeons where prisoners were confined. I tried to have this monumental bit of local history publicized, and one or more of the stones removed to a fitting location, but no success.

Years ago, there was a granite bust of Mendelssohn on a high pedestal in Branch Brook Park, adjacent to Barringer High School. When the original high school building was demolished, and the portion of Branch Brook Park prepared for the site of the new building this monument was removed. It was never returned to the park. I have tried in vain to locate it. When you deal with municipal departments, you encounter a vicious cycle of irresponsibility. We may have noted that the items I suggested for preservation involve no expenditure of public money and no disregard of the public interest. Yet indifference was the response.

Despite discouragements, I shall continue to be interested in the aims and activities of this organization, which has seen fit to present me with the 1984 award in recognition of my contributions to the preservation of Newark history, for which I thank the members.